

# Education sector needs a realistic handling

Higher education both in public and private sector must be given more attention, and instead of levying tax on it attempts must be made to aid its unhindered and smooth growth and expansion.

ABDUL MANNAN

WITHIN a span of a few hours on July 26, two groups of university students, one at Chittagong University and the other in Dhaka's Mohakhali, took to the streets on the same issue, the hike of student fees. The untoward incidents were also repeated the following day.

The first group belonged to a leading public university, where the decision to increase the student fees was taken by the university authorities. The hike, according to the university authorities, ranges from Tk.300 to Tk.1,000. Some of these fees are paid once during a student's stay in the university.

Students pay a paltry sum of Tk.30 per month as tuition fees, whereas they paid at least Tk.100 in college. According to the statistics published by the government and the University Grants Commission, subsidy per student is Tk.4,000 per month.

The second group belonged to some private universities located in the Mohakhali and Gulshan area. They were on the streets because the government had imposed a 4.5% Value Added Tax (VAT) on fees paid by private university students, putting education in the same bracket with toothpaste and toilet paper. A similar VAT was imposed on English medium schools, and they accepted it without any protest.

Allegations against private universities are many, including the charging of very high fees. Then comes the issue of quality

of growth in student enrollment in private universities is about 24% per annum, and in about a couple of year's time the total enrollment in private universities will surely outnumber that of public universities.

The history of private universities in this country is just little over a decade and half old, and within this short span of time quite a few have managed to rise to regional standard. Some have managed to attract faculty and students from abroad and moved to their own campuses. Session jam in private universities is unknown whereas it has become a common culture in public universities.

If all these 2 lakh 16 thousand students had to study in the government subsidised public universities the yearly cost to the public exchequer would be Tk.3,000 crore, according to the UGC calculation.

Instead of appreciating the contribution made by the private sector in higher education, it is unfortunate that the government had decided to levy a tax on it, which may contribute to stunting its growth in future. Some argue that the VAT should be paid by the university authorities and not by the students. It may seem idealistic but is not logical.

When one buys groceries the bill shows the VAT charged. In a restaurant all prices are inclusive of VAT, meaning the customer not only pays for the food but also the VAT. VAT is, almost in all cases, passed on to the customer while the collector (the business) pays the income tax. It is true for all business concerns but not for an educational institution, unless it is created as a business concern (University of Phoenix, Arizona, USA).

Public universities do not pay any tax, excepting the land revenue (reimbursed later by the government), the rate for utilities are also very low, the real estate is free and most educational accessories are purchased or imported duty free. 100% of its development budget and

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90% of recurring budget comes from the taxpayers' money.

One of the private university students who took to the streets, while expressing his discontent, asked whether it was an attempt to finance public sector education by imposing this kind of tax on them.

When the late finance minister Saifur Rahman, in one of his budget proposals, decided to levy tax at the rate of 7.5% on imported books protests flooded in from all quarters and critics said that he was levying a tax on knowledge. Our present finance minister will surely not like to hear that he was trying to levy tax on education.

The prime minister often talks about transforming Bangladesh into "Digital Bangladesh" and removing illiteracy from the country by 2021, while expecting that the present generation will manage to compete with their counterparts in the

region. If these are to be achieved higher education both in public and private sector must be given more attention, and instead of levying tax on it attempts must be made to aid its unhindered and smooth growth and expansion.

Thanks to the finance minister that the decision of imposing VAT on private university tuition fees has been revoked. However, it is unfortunate that it had to come after thousands of protesting students took to the streets, causing damage to vehicles and disrupting normal public life in the area.

Many would also question the students' rationale of going to the streets for realising the demand. Though we cannot endorse such a practice, it has, nevertheless, been proven time and again that only the voice of the street sometimes matters instead of logical arguments.

We hope that the issue of levying VAT on education has been buried permanently

and will not be resurrected in the future.

Another tendency demands the severest of condemnation and a proper enquiry. This is the unwarranted high-handedness and brutality with which a section of our law enforcing agencies came down on the protesting students. The excessive use of brutal force was unnecessary, especially in cases where a protestor was already in the grip of the law enforcers.

Regarding the student movement in Chittagong University, where I had the privilege of teaching for three decades, I would appeal to my young friends to be more logical while framing their demands. Shooting oneself in the foot may ultimately become too expensive, especially in an era when competence and competition do matter. In the end it is they who lose, not the university.

The author teaches at ULAB, Dhaka and is a former Vice-Chancellor, Chittagong University.

# Enhancing disaster management capacity

For efficient and effective disaster management, Bangladesh does not need consultants as much as it needs financing for (a) risk reduction and facilitation of during-disaster rescue operations and relief and rehabilitation of the poor disaster-affected people; and (b) strengthening of DMB with proper staffing, need-based training and performance incentives.

M. A. QUASSEM

COMPREHENSIVE Disaster Management Project (CDMP) is a UNDP-led project of the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, with financing from DFID, EC, SIDA and UNDP. CDMP-I, costing Tk.172.53 crore was completed in 2009. CDMP-II, estimated at Tk.507 crore, has already started, the inception seminar being held in April.

The formal signing of the project document by ERD, MoFDM and UNDP was completed, consultants were recruited and the project started even before its TAPP was approved by the Planning Commission.

That the Awami League-led government is keen to improve disaster management is obvious from the fact that it introduced the Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD) in 1997 for efficient, effective and co-ordinated management of disasters.

The present government has formed a National Disaster Management Advisory Committee (NDMAC) with eight members of the Parliament including the chief whip, resident representative of UNDP, country director of World Bank, heads of relevant government agencies, chairman of University Grants Commission, representatives from six national universities and NGO personalities.

Tk.507 crore is a huge investment, and the GoB as well as the development partners would like to see (a) best use of this investment and (b) that the people are happy with its outcome. The minister and the country representative of UNDP emphasised these points during the inception seminar.

CDMP-II should be formulated by (a) evaluating outputs and outcomes of CDMP-I against the set targets, (b) using the outputs/outcomes in real life situation i.e. performance evaluation, (c) seeing how the assumptions (if any) worked, and (d) identifying difficulties and constraints. All this can be done through independent evaluation by professional evaluation specialist(s).

The "Terminal Evaluation 2009" of CDMP-I is a nicely written report but its "evaluation value" is questionable. It appears from the report that (a) the evaluation team consisted of beneficiaries of the project, which violated the basic principles of constituting an evaluation team, (b) the evaluation methodology was debatable, and (c) systematic analysis was missing.

I visited Aila affected areas in Satkhira a few months after the disaster in 2009 and found that the people were still desperately crying for basic needs like drinking water. There was a lack of basic logistic support for effective monitoring and supervision of rehabilitation activities.

Ironically, Satkhira was a pilot district where CDMP-I was in operation with disaster management programme. With the devastated people crying for drinking water, and basic



One year after Aila.

logistic support for conducting, monitoring and supervising activities of relief and rehabilitation activities missing, how effective was the Tk.172-crore CDMP-I project in its pilot project area and neighbour district? CDMP might submit a list of achievements, but this question needs an answer.

The BBC had forecast 2,000,000 deaths in the flood of 1998, when CDMP-I was not operating; nevertheless, the then government and the people managed that great flood very efficiently. The world acknowledged the exemplary disaster management capacity of Bangladesh and the resilience of her brave people.

CDMP cannot claim any contribution in the management of the 1998 flood, but the contribution (added value) of CDMP-I was useful (value addition) in managing disasters like cyclones Sidr (November, 2007) and Aila (May 2009) which swept the coastal areas of Bangladesh.

Sunamganj suffered terrible devastation due to flash flood in April 2010. Incidentally, it was also a pilot district where CDMP-I worked. It will be worth taking up the pilot districts Satkhira and Sunamganj as cases to study for evaluation of CDMP-I. While Satkhira and Sunamganj represent "with the project" situation, two neighbouring areas may be selected to represent "without the project" situation for evaluation purposes.

Proper evaluation of CDMP-I and learning of lessons are extremely important because there are a number of concerns about the objectives and management of CDMP-II, which have been

discussed in the meeting of NDMAC.

Firstly, it is not clear how CDMP-II can be of use for better management of disasters in the future. The minister for food and disaster management, in his speech at the inception seminar emphasised three issues -- (a) direct benefit to the disaster-affected people, (b) income generating activities, and (c) expenditure on indirect activities.

The draft inception report does not give any roadmap for realisation of the disaster management needs of the country; neither does it

DMB, which is the main GOB agency for co-ordinating and monitoring disaster management activities, has been downplayed in CDMP-I and more so in the Pro-Doc of CDMP-II. The role of DMB has been blatantly ignored, which will hamper the evolution of an effective institution for disaster management.

Another crucial issue is the ownership of the project. Who will take over when CDMP is over and the consultants depart? Has CDMP ever considered this issue? Amusingly enough, even before the pre-inception stage of Phase 2

reflect what the minister emphasised.

Secondly, the project needs a full time national project director (NPD). It does not matter who it is, but the Disaster Management Bureau (DMB) must be the institutional counterpart of the consultants (the so-called management support unit). The Management Support Unit (MSU) should support DMB in operation of the project, but should not be the "de facto" operator.

Otherwise, so far as the development of institutional capacity of DMB is concerned, the present CDMP approach may be suicidal and is contrary to the government's policy. Whether the MSU should be allowed to continue as the "de facto" implementing agency, undermining the role and growth of the DMB, requires rethinking.

The Disaster Management and Relief Division (DMRD), which is a regulatory body of the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management (MoFDM), is also the implementing agency for CDMP. Not only is that not consistent with the Rules of Business, but is also not good practice for good governance. When a DMB is in place -- with a mandate to do this sort of project -- why the ministry should act as the implementing agency is not understood.

Thirdly, there is hardly any emphasis on capacity building of DMB, although the most focussed objective of CDMP had been capacity building. In CDMP-I, DG DMB was the Deputy Project Director (DPD). In the present phase, the ProDoc of CDMP-II argued against making the DG DMB the DPD of the project.

(CDMP-II), the authors of the Terminal Evaluation 2009 of CDMP-I (p.8) dreamt of "further extension of the programme after the end of Phase 2." I am sure that the readers will be surprised to hear it -- so also the GOB and the development partners. Perhaps the dream of continuing CDMP beyond Phase-II played a role in downplaying the issue of strengthening of the institutional capacity of DMB.

For efficient and effective disaster management, Bangladesh does not need consultants as much as it needs financing for (a) risk reduction and facilitation of during-disaster rescue operations and relief and rehabilitation of the poor disaster-affected people; and (b) strengthening of DMB with proper staffing, need-based training and performance incentives.

We have the legal framework -- SODs -- to work with. We need to improve the effectiveness of institutional arrangements at different administrative tiers. This was clearly demonstrated during the management of past major disasters including the 1998 flood, Sidr and Aila.

In conclusion, I may suggest that -- (a) CDMP-II was started without doing the needed exercises in a right way; (b) it is necessary to review and reformulate the whole project to suit the real-life-need for (i) better facilitation of the pre, during and post disaster management efforts, and (ii) to strengthen capacity of the DMB and other related agencies for those purposes.



# 20 reinvented movies

WHY be predictable? Let's think of some new ideas for films. Thanks for the great comments -- I really had to laugh at the cheeky story of Angela and the mysterious stranger following in his car. Angela, you are one brave mother. Can't wait for the follow-ups.

This is a rare internet dispatch from London (the place where I am living has no internet connection) so I have to make a special journey to read your comments.

I am staying in a charming little suburb of North London called Muswell Hill. It's not very sophisticated. When they showed the movie Conan the barbarian here, the local newspaper people obviously thought: "That's a funny name -- and is there a country called Barbaria?" So they "corrected" the name to Conrad the Bavarian.

I was a big fan of fantasy, and guessed what it was meant to be, so I went to the movie -- but there was almost no one else there. I guess most cinemagoers in the town thought Conrad the Bavarian was a bio-pic about a German tourist or something.

Thinking about this reminded me of a game I used to play with my newspaper column readers.

Rules:  
1. Change one letter of a movie title.  
2. Think of a new story to match the revised title.  
For example, Live and let die, the James Bond movie, could become:

Live and let dip: A tough swimming pool guard strictly enforces the rules. But then one day he meets someone who changes his attitude forever.

Or how about this:  
Pirates of the Caribbean could become Pilates of the Caribbean: A Frenchman on a beautiful island decides to start doing some stretching exercises. He talks about his life on the internet and becomes famous.

Here are some more (thanks, Tom, Pete, Diccon and Bob, readers of a certain newspaper for these):

Dive and let die: An evil scuba diver takes his enemies out for a dive and then abandons them by driving off in the boat.

Tonal recall: European has brain transplant so that he can speak Chinese with the correct tones.

Done with the wind: The end of typhoon season is celebrated. Empire of the Sum: Biopic of the rise of accountancy firm Ernst and Young.

Germs of endearment: The story of the rise of AIDS in the 1980s.

Last Mango in Paris: French farmers ban imported fruit from Asia.

Coldfinger: Horror film starring a sadistic protologist.

You only love twice: Warning film about AIDS.

The remains of the Bay: movie about the reclamation projects in Hong Kong waters.

FT: Tale of a pink, wrinkled alien.

Top Hun: Biopic of Mongolian warrior Atilla.

A fridge too far: Airline staff try to prevent domestic workers from taking heavy appliances as carry-on luggage on planes.

Sleeping with the enema: A man takes constipation remedies before going to bed with unfortunate results for his linen.

Over to you!

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